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SOUTH JERSEY

Corzine: Chemical plants still vulnerable

Tuesday, May 10, 2005

Senator pushes for safeguards

 By LAWRENCE HAJNA
 Courier-Post Staff

U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, the Democratic candidate for governor, is renewing his push for tougher anti-terrorism safeguards at chemical plants.

Corzine, D-Hoboken, says he has been continually pushing for better protections in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but says Congress has failed to act.

"Congress' most important responsibility is to secure and protect the American people," Corzine said in a statement Monday.

"And while some private companies should be recognized and applauded for voluntarily increasing security at chemical facilities, far too many are still unprepared to defend against a terrorist attack."

Corzine, who has introduced legislation to improve security at chemical plants, was reacting to a story in Monday's New York Times that detailed security weaknesses at a chemical facility in North Jersey, outside New York.

The article stated that a chemical plant in Kearny, Hudson County, that produces deadly chlorine gas poses a threat to 12 million people within a 14-mile radius. Yet it remains lightly guarded, the newspaper reported.

A reporter and photographer drove around the plant without ever being approached by security, the story reported. The paper further stated that the North Jersey area, with its highly visible refineries and chemical plants, is at high risk for terrorist attacks.

Jim Young of the Work Environment Council, a New Jersey environmental group that supports Corzine's legislation, said the Delaware River, with its refineries and chemical plants, is a potential target as well.

"You're going to see a risk wherever you have big chemical facilities using high volumes of hazardous substances close to populated areas," he said.

S.J. risks persist

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Five refining and chemical plants in South Jersey each could expose a million or more people to highly toxic chemicals in a "worst-case" chemical release, according to a recent study by the council. The study was based on Environmental Protection Agency data.

They are the Solvay Solexis Inc. plant in West Deptford, the FERRO Delaware River plant in Logan, the Valero refinery in Greenwich, and two units of DuPont's Chambers Works plant in Salem County.

Valero, for example, could release a cloud of toxic hydrofluoric acid up to 19 miles, affecting more than 3 million people, the study asserts.

Valero has spent \$5 million on security upgrades since the Sept. 11 attacks, bolstering patrols, gates, roadblocks and monitoring cameras, company spokeswoman Claire Riggs said. The company does not dispute the Work Environment Council numbers, but emphasizes they are based on worst-case scenarios, Riggs said.

Protective measures

Even before the attacks, the refinery had systems designed to significantly reduce vapors from hydrofluoric acid, which is used in the production of premium gasoline, she said. The acid tank is protected by a concrete wall and is designed to be able to transfer its contents within minutes to a backup tank should the primary tank leak, Riggs said. In addition, a water deluge system is in place that would knock down 90 percent of the toxic vapors, she said.

"Senator Corzine mentions that some companies are being proactive. Valero is one of them," Riggs said.

Young blames pressure from chemical industries and their trade associations for holding up the legislation, introduced shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"They favor regulation but as long as it's voluntary compliance," he said. "It sounds like a joke but it's not."

Corzine's bill aims to encourage companies to find nonhazardous alternatives to chemicals or change processes to reduce hazards.

"There's a growing awareness in the U.S. that guns, guards and gates don't adequately protect us. They're important but actual safety measures work better," Young said.

Another opinion

But Elvin Montero, a spokesman for the Chemistry Council of New Jersey, a trade group, said the largest companies already utilize practices designed to reduce toxic chemical use as much as possible. Montero pointed out that hazardous chemicals are needed to produce things such as Kevlar that is used in body armor for soldiers in Iraq.

Montero said his group supports Corzine's bill, but only to the point of bringing security at smaller facilities into line with what the bigger ones already do.

While he said he could not discuss those procedures in detail, he added facilities have procedures to shut down processes and minimize toxic releases.

"This will benefit all of us if it morphs into a security bill," Montero said.

Corzine, meanwhile, will push for tougher industry safeguards in New Jersey through legislation or executive order if elected governor, said David Wald, his spokesman.

"It's not something he thinks should be voluntary," Wald said. "He feels it's something everyone should have to do, and there's no law in New Jersey."

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